



Notes on Set Design and Cinema

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Notes on Set Design and Cinema

Set design and art direction have been the subjects of a number of articles and monographs in film and design journals over the last ten years or so. The approach of most of this work has been decidedly auteurist. The issue of *Film Comment* for May–June 1978, for example, had a 36–page color midsection on the Hollywood art director. This combined critical discussions, interviews, and filmographies of eleven art directors, each of whom, we were told, “brought his own vision to that of the script.”¹ “The Brave New Worlds of Production Design,” an *American Film* article of January–February 1982,² is also auteurist in orientation, as is a monograph on set design and production design in a recent issue of *Design Quarterly*.³

The discovery of distinctive creators among set designers and production directors is the latest stage of an auteurist dialectic that has earlier journeyed from director to writer to cameraman. The first step at each of these stages is, of course, to identify the leading personalities who expressed themselves in the category of film-making in question. In this way auteurist critics have added sphere after sphere of individual “authorship” to the film-making equation without ever arriving at a concept of genuinely collaborative or collective endeavor. Rather it is said that a particular film was “dominated” by the personality of the director or writer or cameraman or production designer or, failing that, that two or more of these conflicted in ways that were interesting, uninteresting, or whatever.

It’s not just film criticism, of course. Ours is a society of the curriculum vitae. Every event, for good or ill, has to be assigned to the credit or blame of individuals. (Otherwise, in a real sense, that event does not exist or remains a troubling mystery.) This axiom, which would have been incomprehensible to other centuries, is so basic to our own that it operates beneath our awareness. It both expresses our society’s individualism and is one of its chief instruments for suppressing the notion of the collective. We

superficially extol teamwork but relentlessly break it down as far as possible into individual credits. Who really dominated a meeting or a project? Who was the most valuable player? Who should be promoted to a position of authority over his or her former equals? Baseball, basketball, and hockey even devote a category to “assists,” which become part of a player’s record. This is no doubt a corrective to the impression continually fostered by media commentary that the big-scoring stars win games by themselves. But doesn’t it also presuppose that assisting others is a rare, noteworthy event which, if not recognized and rewarded, might disappear altogether?

This said, it is by no means easy to rid ourselves of auteurist turns of writing and speech, even when we are on our guard. This is because such proclivities are deeply engrained in our language and ourselves. It is also because the structures of knowledge about film, as about so many topics, are author-oriented. We know vastly more about Hitchcock’s films than about thousands of others. We necessarily draw our examples, not to mention our principles—conformist or antinomian—from, or in regard to, such structures. It might be to the point to mark troublesome words—words under supervision—by crossing them out whenever they appear, as Heidegger and Derrida sometimes do with metaphysical and logocentric ones. It would not do much good to write ~~author~~ or ~~auteur~~ but it might prompt thought to write ~~Hitchcock~~ or ~~Rossellini~~ or ~~Renoir~~.

*Designing Dreams: Modern Architecture in the Movies*⁴ by Donald Albrecht is at least partially a non-auteurist approach to the question of set design, although it too has serious methodological limitations. Albrecht’s thesis is that the modern movement in architecture—Sullivan, Wright, Le Corbusier, Mies Van der Rohe, the Bauhaus designers and others—had a large and important impact on Hollywood set design in the 1920s and 1930s, especially between the mid-twenties and 1939. The first part of the book presents a brief account of modern

architecture itself and its influence on European cinema between 1916 and 1933. The book's second and longer part traces the impact of the modern movement on some notable Hollywood set designs. Albrecht focuses sometimes on specific designers, sometimes on the movement's more general Hollywood influence. He devotes approximately the same number of pages to Paul Nelson, a virtually unknown designer; Cedric Gibbon, a very well-known one; and such lesser-known figures as Robert Usher, Charles D. Hall, and Anton Grot. Even better, he treats them all in the same manner: for their relation to the modern movement in architecture rather than their "personal visions."

Albrecht tends perhaps toward that "art history without names"⁵ practiced by Heinrich Wölfflin. (Auteurism is a history of nothing but names.) He marks out a period in the history of film style—not dependent upon or corresponding to the life of any individual—and then examines some of the stylistic influences that operated on set design generally during the period, considering in doing so many specific instances.

Albrecht acknowledges that Hollywood set designers had "only a tangential relation to the architectural profession."⁶ They absorbed the new style from exhibitions and their catalogs, books, and other materials. Indeed, Albrecht's chapter on the modern movement is built around five pivotal exhibitions: the Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris (1925); the exhibition of the Deutscher Werkbund at Stuttgart (1927); Modern Architecture: International Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1932); the Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago (1933–34); and the New York World's Fair (1939–40). These exhibitions not only "defined the progress of modernism,"⁷ they presented its principles in a more direct and fully realized way than architectural practice was most often able to do.

Albrecht establishes his case that modern architecture influenced Hollywood set design but that case, if not so well documented before, is not exactly a new one. Critics and historians of twenties–thirties Hollywood have long been aware of the connection. Many films—RKO musicals, for instance—can hardly be discussed without invoking it. *Designing Dreams* is more interesting, it seems to me, when the defense of

the overall thesis gives way to a freer exploration. This is notably the case in Albrecht's long last chapter, "The Modern Mystique," in which he offers "subjective readings of the different aspects of modern architecture that have thus far been discussed objectively."⁸

Under the heading "Modernism in the Home," for instance, Albrecht discusses Kitchens, Bedrooms and Bathrooms. He then proceeds to "Offices," "Nightclubs," "Hotels," "Ocean Liners," "Skyscrapers," and "Cities of the Future." These passages are often informative but they, too, include material with which film scholars are already familiar: DeMille's cult of the bathroom, the stylized offices in *The Crowd* (Vidor, 1928), the nightclub set in *Swing Time* (1936), the hotel set in *Grand Hotel* (1932), the ocean liner in *Shall We Dance?* (1937), the paper skyscraper set in *42nd Street* (1933), and, of course, the futuristic cities of *Metropolis* (1926) and *Things to Come* (1936). Discussions of lesser-known films in each category, however, are quite often of interest.

The photographs of *Designing Dreams*—163 in 174 pages, 92 taking up a half-page or more—are as important as its words. Very well chosen and arranged throughout, they do not simply support the book's argument—in equal degree they are its argument. The principal limitations of Albrecht's analysis derive, paradoxically, from the same source—not the photographs themselves but his complete methodological reliance upon them. The book's preface tells us that Ludwig Glaeser, a curator in the Department of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art, proposed to Albrecht, a practicing architect and film-lover, "a study that would begin as a comparison of the Museum's vast files of architectural photographs with its enormous collection of movie stills."⁹ Comparing two groups of photographs was not just the book's starting point, however, but its method throughout. The architectural side of Albrecht's argument is less dependent upon the photographs included than the filmic side because it is much more firmly grounded. Albrecht has studied, and extensively drawn upon, the pivotal manifestos and exhibitions of the modern movement, the plans and writings of the particular architects he discusses, his own exploration of their buildings, etc. The photographs function if not simply as illustrations,

then as the parallel register of an argument independently sustained.

This is not true, however, of the photographs of Hollywood sets. Albrecht's reliance upon the Museum of Modern Art's superb collection of movie stills accounts, to be sure, for the clarity and luminosity of the photographs of film sets in *Designing Dreams*. Those stills, however, are almost entirely production photographs, not frame enlargements. Stills were taken by professional photographers under contract to the studios, or hired for the occasion, who routinely photographed a film's leading players in many or most of the film's important scenes, primarily for publicity purposes. Notable sets were also sometimes photographed for their own interest, or emphasized in shots of the players.¹⁰

Production stills have their value and uses in research on set design and other topics. The issue of production stills versus frame enlargements cannot be decided in the abstract—it depends upon the context in which they are used and the functions which they are to serve. To pose frame enlargements versus production stills as an issue between truth and falsehood, as some film analysts do, is not only fetishistic but wrong-headed. Production stills are as true as frame enlargements—but they are true to different things and for different purposes. They are different kinds of evidence, appropriate for different kinds of arguments. Albrecht's error is not in using production stills or even, perhaps, in using them exclusively. His error is that he, or rather his book's argument, never consults the films in which these sets were used. Albrecht identifies the photographs he studies with the sets they represent and assumes that they appear exactly as pictured in the films for which they were designed.

Albrecht's complete reliance on movie production stills reveals that he is concerned almost entirely with the styles of film sets, hardly at all with the functions they serve. This is paradoxical, of course, since the modern movement in architecture is known for its renewed emphasis on function. The responsibility of form to function was, indeed, the very hallmark of its statements and manifestoes. Still photographs necessarily omit function by showing sets out of context, not as they appear and operate in films. Among other limitations, still photographs generally show film sets only frontally, whereas films typically show them from several

angles. (The frontal perspective in effect turns film sets into stage sets, and those indeed of a decidedly old-fashioned theater.) The photographs Albrecht uses rarely show people occupying or standing in front of sets and never, of course, show them moving through them—all of which alter our perception and experience of them. Finally, Albrecht does not consider narrative, whose effects in individual scenes and throughout a film also condition our perception and response.

Consider as an example of these points the photograph of the kitchen set built for *Bringing up Baby* (1938), which appears on page 114 (Fig. 1). It represents, of course, part of the Connecticut home of Susan's aunt—Susan (Katherine Hepburn) has maneuvered paleontologist David (Cary Grant) there only to have her aunt's dog George bury David's irreplaceable intercostal clavicle. (At dinner with the aunt, the aunt's friend, and Susan that evening, David gets up and follows George whenever he leaves the room.) The photograph of the kitchen set reveals, it is true, things one had not noticed in viewing the film. A modern range is incongruously embedded in country stone walls and a modern sink and counter area oddly tucked in a corner of the otherwise rustic setting. A modern mixer is juxtaposed with an old-fashioned butter-churn, etc. One might be tempted to call this a screwball set designed to go with a screwball film. However, even a casual reviewing of the film reveals that the kitchen set is not a separate set at all but a part or section of a much larger set. It reveals also that the viewer rarely, if ever, sees this part of the set head-on, but nearly always from a side angle and far away. The kitchen, moreover, is never used on camera—when we first see the foursome at the table, dinner has already been served. When Susan and/or David do pass somewhere in front of the kitchen area, they are usually running, which rivets our eyes to them. When Susan tries to explain to her just-arrived aunt who David is and why he is dressed in a woman's frilly dressing gown, there is a shot of the three characters, and a maid, standing in front of the kitchen section. We can see the butter churn on the right side of the frame but, because of the four figures, not much else. In any case, the comic tension of the scene keeps our attention focused on the characters. Such tension and focus, in *Baby* and other films, are not just local phenomena, of course,



Fig. 1:
Kitchen
set for
BRINGING
UP BABY.

but effects of the film as a whole—it is one of the meanings of the word “narrative.” The efficacy of these effects varies, to be sure, from film to film and from part to part in any film. The dullness of some narratives, sometimes those with spectacular sets, seem to invite us to look around. *Baby*’s absorbing action and fast pace prevent one, however, from noticing even this strange set.

The first floor set of Susan’s aunt’s home in *Baby*, the area where Susan and David run, could not be rendered by a still photograph—unless several were taken and arranged in a three-dimensional model. *Bringing Up Baby* is not exceptional in this respect. Leon Barsacq emphasizes in *A History of Set Design* the radical differences between stage sets and film sets.¹¹ He stresses again and again the need to construct sets with all of a scene’s camera angles and camera movements in mind. (This requires advance planning with the director and cinematographer, another thing Barsacq advocates.) A set so constructed will elude encapsulization by the still camera: there is no single vantage point that can contain it.

For a number of reasons, such planning is not always possible. Certain directors—Renoir is the example Barsacq cites—prefer, some of

the time at least, to improvise on the set. “Too much preparation impeded him. Some of his best ideas came to him on the set: in *La Marseillaise* (1938), Leon Barsacq could never get his opinion of a set until the camera was in position.”¹² There is some lingering frustration perhaps in Barsacq’s account. Eugene Lourie, who designed eight films for Renoir, perhaps adapted his work better to an improvisational method. He says, apropos *Rules of the Game*:

Apart from the hunting scenes on the Solonge location, the film was played almost entirely in two basic settings at the studio. One was the Paris apartment of Marquis de la Chesnaye and the other was the interior of the castle . . . In my conception the entrance hall was the hub of all castle activities. One entered the house there from the terrace; from there the main stairway led to the upper floor and the bedrooms. Also from the hall, another stairway led down toward the kitchen and the servant quarters. On one side the hall opened onto a small sitting room, which had entrances to the large ballroom. On the other side of the entry hall, double doors opened to a gunroom . . . From the gunroom, doors led to a large dining room. In addition to the doors leading from one room to another, I provided a side corridor open to all these rooms, giving Renoir a playing area where he could stage the climactic chase sequence. For this set I planned to open the wall between the two large stages of the Pathé studio, making room for the unusually deep set of the main

floor of the castle. I wanted to build all the rooms of this floor on the same set to clarify the visual connections between rooms and allow Jean more fluidity in staging the continuous chase of Modot after the elusive Carette. It would offer a more elegant way of shooting, without obliging the camera to cut from one set to another. By combining the two stages, I would have a useful area of about 150 by 60 feet.¹³

Such complex sets, needless to say, cannot be captured by the still camera. It was not only Renoir who departed from a preset plan—or had none to begin with. Nicholas Ray defined proper camera usage as “the director putting it literally on his shoulder and hunting for the truth of a scene.”¹⁴ In the absence of a Lourie to prepare sets that facilitate improvisation, Ray’s definition might entail filming against the grain of a restrictive set. The interior of Vienna’s saloon in *Johnny Guitar* is a fairly large, open set. Ray does not use it to stage fluid character motions, however—his blocking is rather stiff. Instead, he uses framing, cutting, lighting, and a remarkable number and diversity of camera angles to transform this rather literal, plain space into a visual and emotional texture of considerable range and variety. This is a matter of directorial skills, by the way, not of “personality.”

We might recall at this point the question of the production still: the gleaming frontal photograph of a pristine set that we never see in the film it was built for. Or only in the distance or from a decidedly different angle or otherwise not resembling the set of the photograph. Such stills serve, among other things, to raise questions about what happened between the planning and the shooting of the film, or between the shooting and the editing. Did Hawks and Company plan a scene in the kitchen set—either the preparation of dinner there or the maid’s serving from it and therefore, presumably, the dinner’s early stages?

* * *

The number of films that use sets alone—even in the complex ways indicated—are fewer than those that use sets in conjunction with photographic effects, which are usually included in what are misleadingly called “special effects.” In the introduction to his book, Albrecht touches very briefly upon optical effects that are sometimes built into sets. Noting that the spectator has two eyes but the camera only one, he says

Set designers compensate for this phenomenon by

employing a series of optical tricks to achieve the illusion of depth. The simplest of these is the placement of walls, screens, or other large objects in the foreground of the picture. Functioning as frames, these elements heighten the perception of distance between foreground and background. Equally effective is the use of false perspective, in which objects in the distance are built in a smaller scale than those in the foreground, again creating the semblance of depth.¹⁵

Unfortunately, Albrecht does not return to these issues in any of the discussions that follow—even the points he makes here are limited by his reliance on frontal photographs of film sets. More important for the present discussion is his assumption that sets alone create the apparent worlds of films, sometimes called their diegesis. It is evident, however, that the very optical conditions that make possible spatial illusion within film sets, including but not limited to the ones Albrecht mentions, also make possible the replacement of such sets, in part or whole, by miniatures, elaborately built to scale, and/or by various devices that create composite images—rear projection, glass shots, static and travelling mattes, the Shufftan process, the optical printer, and a large number of variations and combinations of these and other processes. It is not only sets that are replaced in whole or part by these methods, of course, but “locations” also.

Such devices are far more pervasive in classical cinema than most critics and theorists, even sophisticated ones, have realized or, in any case, acknowledged. Linwood G. Dunn, who did the optical printing for *Citizen Kane*, recalled in a 1983 essay:

I was asked during post-production to make radical alterations in certain filmed scenes . . . There are probably not more than three or four persons living today who really know the great extent of post-production modifications made throughout this film . . . as well as the many other photographic effects techniques that were utilized.¹⁶

That more people now know Dunn’s story is due chiefly to Robert L. Carringer’s 1985 book, *The Making of Citizen Kane*,¹⁷ which synthesizes the testimony of the film’s many collaborators. The “deep-focus” shot of Susan’s suicide attempt—glass and poison in extreme foreground, Kane and doctor bursting into the room in the background (Fig. 2)—is in fact an in-camera matte shot. (The foreground was lit and focused with the background dark, then the foreground was darkened, the background lit, the lens refocused, the film rewound, and the

scene reshot.) The shot of a tiny Kane at the end of a long corridor at Xanadu is a composite of three separately photographed elements. The opening shot of *Xanadu* “begins with a moving camera shot up a prop fence, and it continues with a series of shots, connected by fades and dissolves, of miniatures, models, and background paintings.”¹⁸ (Fig. 3) Carringer estimates that more than 50% of the film’s total footage involves special effects of one kind or another; Dunn says that in some reels the percentage of optically printed work is as high as 80%.¹⁹

It took over forty years for the role of photographic effects in the making of *Citizen Kane* to emerge. It is impossible to say precisely how widely such effects were used in classical cinema, because data on the point has not been gathered. (Film theorists, critics, and historians have not made research into such matters a priority.) It is evident, however, that such effects were by no means limited to Hollywood and, in the European cinema, their use was by no means limited to fantasists such as Cocteau. Although some of his statements denounce fancy titles and special effects, Roberto Rossellini himself invented a modification of the Shufftan process which permits its use with zoom shots. It uses “a special mixture of silver salts and glucose for partly silvering glass to form a mirror which makes it possible . . . to combine action with scale models.”²⁰ Rossellini used this device particularly in his historical films. Among other instances, the Versailles scenes in *The Rise to Power of Louis XIV* (1966) were created by virtue of this device.

As for Renoir, he did not often have a giant set to explore such as the one that Lourie designed for *Rules of the Game*. Like other film-makers, he sometimes resorted to visual effects of one kind or another. In *Nana* (1926), he used a glass shot in conjunction with a partially constructed set by Claude Autant-Lara. The floor and grand stairway of a mansion were constructed by the set designer; its ornate upper story and ceiling were painted on the upper part of a sheet of glass that was placed close to the camera. When the camera photographed the partial set through the glass, the painted image merged with the partial set in a seamless illusion.²¹ (Fig. 4). In *Marquitta* (1927), Renoir used a Shufftan shot of the Barbes-Rochouart elevated Métro stop in Paris. His later film *The Little Match Girl* (1929) was entirely shot in a



Fig. 2: CITIZEN KANE.

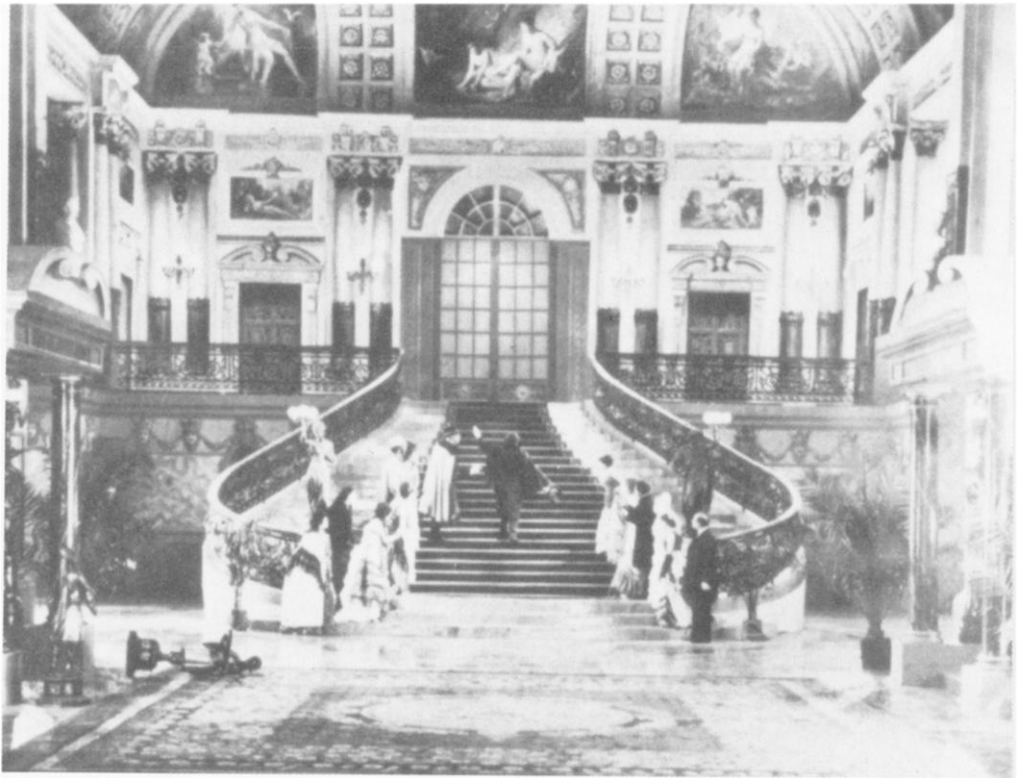


Fig. 3: CITIZEN KANE.

studio and largely fabricated from special effects. Renoir’s sound films do not seem to have resorted much to such effects—aside from matching studio interiors with outdoor scenes, which is one of cinema’s oldest “special effects.”

Barsacq notes as nearly a general rule that Renoir preferred to work in studios rather than on location, for the same reason that other directors do: because he could control every aspect of the film more carefully. (Eugene Lourie corroborates this.) When Renoir did

Fig. 4:
The set
for *NANA*.
Everything
above the
stairs
(except
central
doors)
is a
painting
on
glass.



shoot on location, Barsacq notes, he liked “to place constructed sets (the shop in *Boudu Saved from Drowning*, walls with a window in *La Marsellaise* and *La Bête humaine*) in front of real landscapes, using the animation of real streets, railroads, and other outdoor locations.”²² John Ford did this quite often also—the doors and windows of the Edwards house in *The Searchers* open up quite improbably upon one of the enormous rock formations of Monument Valley.

The processes involved in each example cited were, to be sure, different or were put to different uses. *Kane* employed a wide variety of photographic effects for a number of cinematographic purposes. Rossellini used his variation of the Shufftan process largely for “documentary” purposes: not only to use images taken at Versailles—or images of a model thereof—as “authentic” background for scenes that were set there, but also to composite these with shots of workmen working in the “foreground” seeming to finish its construction; and later Louis and his court walking in the gardens adjacent to it. In *Nana*, inversely, Renoir used a painted glass shot to provide an actual set with a fictional upper wall and ceiling.

The films of Alfred Hitchcock make such integral and extensive use of photographic and other effects that it is not particularly illuminat-

ing to consider any one of his images—or favorite devices—in isolation. Actors, sets, montage, photographic effects and other elements work together—in concert—to create a narrative that carries us along so firmly that we often fail to notice, or will not to do so, the means by which it is created. In many Hitchcock films there is an odd transaction between narrative and special effects. The effects help to create the film’s narrative world; and at the same time our absorption in the narrative either prevents our seeing such devices or makes us impervious to them.

From the standpoint of narrative construction, Hitchcock’s films move quickly from event to event. There is no time to introduce spaces before the action that is to occur there, hence landmarks are used as a sort of shorthand that allows successive phases of the action to proceed without intervals or preliminaries. Hitchcock typically begins with a location shot of the landmark in question—Mount Rushmore in *North by Northwest*, for example. After the CIA man explains the film’s plot to Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant) in a Chicago airport, Hitchcock cuts from Grant’s face, as he realizes Eve’s precarious state, to a shot of Mount Rushmore in South Dakota. The camera zooms to a closer shot of the heads of the four presidents, which is emphasized further by an iris (a

circular matte) that suddenly appears. This is followed by a shot of Thornhill, framed against a long shot of the mountain, looking through a telescope viewer. We know from this shot that Thornhill has decided to cooperate with the CIA to protect Eve—he is talking to the CIA man as he looks through the viewer. We know, at another level, that the mountain will have a role in the action. (There are nine shots of the mountain in this scene and two more in the next.) Chekhov said that if you introduce a pistol in Act I, it must go off by Act III. Hitchcock adapts this—if you see Mount Rushmore at the beginning of a sequence you know that his characters will climb down it at its end.

Special effects were used throughout *North by Northwest*,²³ but perhaps most intensively and in the most combinations in the climax on Mt. Rushmore. Hitchcock changes angles as frequently here as he does elsewhere, a method that provides the viewer with ever new perspectives but puts unusual burdens on his set designers and special-effects people. The first sight of the monument by the fleeing couple—the back of the presidents' heads—appears to be a constructed set. Six minutes and 108 shots elapse between this shot and the end of the film. The couple's descent and the villains' pursuit down the face of the monument, moving around and between the heads and various rock formations, is accomplished by, among others, the following devices: Partial sets of rock formations are shot flush against vast rear projections of a presidential face or faces (in various angles) or a vista of surrounding bluffs. (Fig. 5) Sometimes the characters are shot directly against rear projections. In all cases, wind effects on the clothing of the actors supplement the illusion. In shots showing the position of some or all of the characters on the mountainside—in order to show their position relative to the other characters and/or to the monument—some or all of them are matted in through multiple exposure. The long shot of the police and the CIA man when they first appear on the mountaintop at the end of the sequence seems to be a shot of the mountain with figures, the actors or stand-ins, matted in. This is followed by a series of closer shots of the actors standing and then crawling on a set designed to match the mountain. The last shot in this series shows Thornhill straining to pull up Eve, who is hanging from the rock below him. A "cut on motion" completes this action in a sleeping

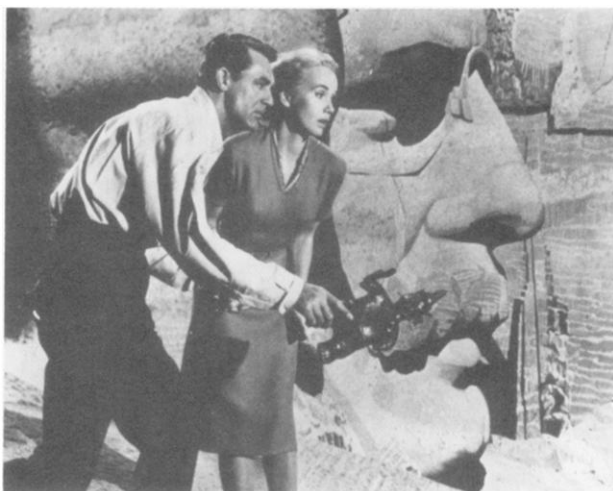


Fig. 5: NORTH BY NORTHWEST.

compartment on a train back to New York, as Thornhill pulls Eve to an upper bunk.

As a result of Hitchcock's wide and extensive use of photographic and special effects, there are very often different kinds of composites in successive shots. If the individual images of *North by Northwest* are each composites in the manner discussed above, then a narrative passage like the Mount Rushmore sequence is a composite of composites.

The photographic effects reviewed above all contributed to a composite image of some kind. What in each case presented itself as a single image, derived from a single source and a single process, produced at a single time and place was in fact a multiple or layered image, a composite of different kinds of materials, derived from processes conducted at different times and in different places. The apparently homogenous image is actually heterogeneous.

The notion of an image whose production is divided in time and space—not to mention "false" in itself—poses a serious challenge to film theory, classical and modern, and to the methods of criticism based upon them. Theorists from Bazin and Mitry to Metz and Baudry have enormously privileged the camera and have built their versions of the camera-object and the spectator-film relationships on the centrality of the camera. (Perhaps we should now write in every case "the camera" if not ~~the camera~~.) The positions of Bazin and Mitry are too well-known and often-criticized to require elaboration. Jean-Louis Baudry's work is also, however, thoroughly camera-

centered. In his "The Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," it is the camera and the projector that comprise the eponymous apparatus. The camera is the "site of the inscription":

The movie camera differs from still photography by registering through its mechanical instrumentation a series of images . . . But here we must turn to the relation between the succession of images inscribed by the camera and their projection, bypassing momentarily the place occupied by montage, which plays a decisive role in the strategy of the ideology produced.²⁴

Editing is understood by Baudry as the central problem that he must deal with—the image itself and its generation, self-evidently the work of the camera, is not a problem. When Baudry turns to the topic of "the transcendental subject," he begins by saying: "at this point we must return to the camera." He concludes near the end of his essay, "The ideological mechanism at work in the cinema seems thus to be concentrated in the relationship between the camera and the subject." Baudry's discussions of the perspective system are rooted in his notion of the camera but perhaps could be adapted to include the divided image we have discussed, which is also dependent upon the perspective system.

The work of Christian Metz has also been camera-centered throughout the course of his theoretical career. His early work stressed the image's impression of reality in a way that veered between phenomenological realism and basic semiotics. Metz's theoretical approaches have changed throughout his work, but it is not entirely clear that he changed his sense of the image—which in any case remained unproblematic. (For Metz too montage was a central theoretical problem to be explained.) Unique among theorists, however, Metz posed the problem of photographic and other effects in an essay called, "Trucage and the Film."²⁵ The purpose of Metz's essay is first of all to justify his title's designation of photographic effects as "tricks," that is, as illusions which oppose, he implies, the truth of the usual camera-generated image. He distinguishes imperceptible and invisible tricks but his examples throughout link them to special genres, never to a classic film like *Citizen Kane*. In this way and others, Metz's persistent turn of argument is to marginalize photographic and other effects. The strangest way he does this is again and again to

compare and contrast such effects with cinematic punctuation—fades, dissolves, etc. This bizarre conjunction evidently has the goal, perhaps unconscious, of banishing such effects to the margins of the film, similar to the location of punctuation marks at the borders of sequences. Both in any event are special cases, apart from the main stuff of cinema, which is comprised of camera-generated images.

* * *

What would subversion or transgression be in the construction or use of filmic sets? What, if such a thing is conceivable, would they be in the design or use of photographic and other special effects? What models of subversion or transgression might be consulted in making such determinations? These are questions that here can only be broached, and perhaps augmented with other questions.

Julia Kristeva's discussions of transgression center on avant-garde artistic practices. She writes of the need to identify the systematic constraints within each signifying practice in order to overthrow one or more of them in transgressive textual activity. Her examples are literary—Lautrémont, Mallarmé, Artaud, Joyce—but her argument centers on artistic activity generally. The following passage, for example, applies quite well to both the histories and current practices of commercial narrative cinema, not only in Hollywood but virtually everywhere.

Not every signifying practice embraces the totality of the process that I have indicated. Multiple constraints of, in the last instance, a socio-political order arrest the process of signification at one or another of the stases it crosses and immobilize this process in a structure which eliminates the practice by posing fragmented, symbolic "systems"—copies of a few social constraints obliterating the infinity of the process.²⁴

Kristeva's model leads us to the filmic and video avant-garde, past and present. Much work in the avant-garde tradition does not use sets at all—in many cases no "background" whatever. Other avant-garde film-makers deny the viewer spatial orientation by constructing incoherent, dreamlike, or impossible spaces. These aesthetic ends are most often pursued in "experimental narratives"—those sectors of the avant-garde that have some division of spaces according to a series of events, however dreamlike or disconnected. Works in this large

category include, besides Buñuel, Cocteau, Del-luc, Dulac, Epstein, etc., in the twenties, Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* (1947), some of Andy Warhol's films and, more recently, the work of Yvonne Rainer and Erika Beckman, among many others.

From one point of view, these works subvert the spatial and architectural codes of the Hollywood and mainstream European cinema. From another point of view, it diminishes such works to see their primary operation as a critique of commercial cinema. They do something much more interesting and important than that—they use space in new ways to create new kinds of aesthetic entities, that is, new kinds of audience engagement with cinematic “space.” This, however, is a subject too large to be engaged here.

Roland Barthes's definition of transgression has to do with practices within a signifying field, not of those that lie outside it. This is his emphasis when he defines semiotic transgression as “a paradigm . . . extended into a syntagm.”

There is then a defiance of the usual distribution syntagm/system, and it is probably around this transgression that a great number of creative phenomena are situated, as if perhaps there were here a junction between the field of aesthetics and the defections from the semantic system. The chief transgression is obviously the extension of a paradigm on to the syntagmatic plane, since normally only one term of the operation is actualized, the other (or others) remaining potential: this is what would happen, broadly speaking, if one attempted to elaborate a discourse by putting one after the other all the terms of the same declension.²⁵

What would be transgression in this sense in the construction or use of film sets? In the design or use of photographic and other special effects? Besides the difficulty of the questions, Barthes's standard itself is not entirely clear. On the one hand it seems too inclusive: if around transgression “a great number of creative phenomena are situated,” then transgression is not only common but virtually synonymous with art itself. If this is so, however, then why it is so difficult to locate examples that meet Barthes's standard precisely? And why do those who attempt to apply his standard so often seem to be forcing their texts or fudging their results? In this sense Barthes's standard is too narrow.

To approach the problem from another di-

rection, we might note that Barthes's definition of transgression is closely bound up with the methods and interests of critics, who most often proceed by invoking or creating paradigms absent from a text in order to illuminate it. Biographical critics do this by reading the life into the work; others by reading one or more of an author's works in light of all his or her other works and/or works by other artists (“influences”); still others by reading a work according to one or more theoretically based methods, etc. Barthes specifies works that reveal one (or more?) of their paradigms by their own operation, and that constitute themselves as texts partly or wholly in this way. It requires a critic, however, to recognize and explain such an operation. To say this is to acknowledge that describing a work as extending a paradigm onto a syntagm is always a creative act of reading, never a mere discovery of what is already there. It might be said, on the contrary, that in Barthesian transgression it is the text itself that does the work of criticism. This statement too, however, is a critical judgment.

Materials outside of a finished text are regularly consulted by film critics in constructing paradigms—early drafts of a screenplay, for instance. Photographs of film sets, discussed above, are sometimes useful in constructing paradigms. The celluloid equivalents of such materials are very rare, unfortunately, but are often illuminating when available; for instance, the Chaplin outtakes and other materials gathered by Kevin Brownlow and David Gill in *The Unknown Chaplin*. Scenes shot but not used and nonused takes of a scene that does appear in the released version of a film—these are not only paradigms but transgressive in the sense that they were not intended to be seen. (Chaplin ordered them destroyed by his brother Sydney, who did less than a complete job.) The same might be said of a production still accidentally showing *The Immigrant's* rocking ship as a set mounted on rollers; and one of an “outdoor” location in *The Gold Rush* showing the edge of a studio set and technicians beyond it. These paradigms, located outside the text, nevertheless subvert the illusions that the film strives, otherwise successfully to achieve.

What would a transgressive use of special effects be? All the special effects we reviewed above depend in one way or another on overlaying photographic materials of different scales in order to create a composite image of

a single scale. The differences in scale of such constituent film image materials were carefully kept from the public. For instance, a publicity still made available to the trade for the 1933 film *Deluge* reveals the true scale of an elaborate miniature of New York City by showing technicians working on it. “Information Intended for Exhibitors Only” is the warning printed across the top of the photo. To show objects of disparate scale in the same image was transgressive in classical cinema and was carefully avoided, even in publicity photos.

Today, on the other hand, effects designers are celebrated as auteurs and are frequently photographed alongside their creations, including models and miniatures. With rare exceptions, films themselves, however, still observe strictly the singleness of scale. *Time Bandits* and the ship/building section of *Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life*, directed by Terry Gilliam, concern themselves, intermittently at least, with two illusionistic qualities of the cinematic image—the relativity of scale within it and its illusion of depth which, as we have seen, are closely related, indeed two sides of a single system. *Time Bandits* treats these issues at several levels: plot, dialogue, actors, gags, images, editing, etc. This is not a matter of auteurism—*Jabberwocky*, also directed by Gilliam, is not at all concerned with these issues—but of textual strategy. It is not unusual for a work to seem to circulate a certain problem from level to level, only one or several of which a critic may determine to be transgressive or otherwise interesting.

In the little boy’s bedroom in *Time Bandits*, the picture of a mediaeval knight tacked to his wardrobe suddenly bursts into three dimensions and menaces him with charging steed and waving sword. When the attack is over, the boy examines the picture by taking it in his two hands: to make sure that it *is* flat.

The next night five dwarfs tumble into his room out of the same wardrobe. The latter’s apparent shallowness reveals upon closer inspection a surprising depth, a passage, indeed, from and to other worlds. When the dwarfs and boy attempt to leave, escaping the Supreme Being, the wardrobe and the wall behind it move back at an alarming rate, stretching the boy’s room to a virtually infinite depth, bounded only by a hole in space that they all tumble through.

Many of the film’s later situations and gags also reveal a preoccupation with scale.

Napoleon, for instance, is so obsessed with his shortness that he talks of nothing but height.²⁶ Watching a Punch and Judy show, he is apoplectic when full-sized performers take the stage. “What I like is little people hitting each other,” he says. Embarrassed by his tall staff members, he orders them to give their uniforms to the dwarfs; he then invites them to dinner and regales them with tales of other short men who made history. Perhaps the film’s boldest play with scale concerns the sailing ship piloted by the dwarfs. A storm that rocks the boat turns out to be a giant emerging from the water—he walks onto land wearing the ship on his head like a hat (Fig. 6). All of these instances, it is true, are justified by the story—the transgressive edge is blunted by immediate diegeticization. The sudden emergence of the giant with the dwarfs’ ship on his head, however, so jars our sense of scale that even the narrative episode with the giant that follows does not overcome it. The diegeticization is weaker than the shock itself—it seems like rationalization or secundarization of a trauma that has occurred at the primary process level.



Fig. 6: *TIME BANDITS*.

There is a moment in *Brazil* that seems like genuine Barthesian transgression—all the more interesting for being tangential to the film’s plot. We see Sam Lowry driving his tiny one-man automobile amidst trucks so huge that we cannot see the environment at all. (He is on his way to deliver a check to the widowed Mrs. Buttle, in whose house he will meet the love of his life; she, or rather his own fantasies, will

soon cost him his own life.) Lowry pulls ahead and Gilliam cuts to a moving shot down a row of what look like huge nuclear reactors. We assume that this is what Lowry sees—or is fantasizing—as he drives into the clear. The road comes to a stop, however, in front of a reactor standing in the middle of the road. As the moving shot—and Lowry's implied motion—slows, the huge face of a drunk holding a beer bottle suddenly emerges to the side of the central reactor. The next shot reveals that it is a glass-enclosed model with a normal-sized drunk pressed against it. Behind the model, at a great distance, we see Lowry's car continuing on its way.

Whether this moment is perceived by audiences as an exposure of the illusions of scale or, on the contrary, as a new kind of spectacle, is an interesting question. Who is transgression for, anyway?

NOTES

1. Mary Corliss and Carlos Clarens, "Designed for Film: The Hollywood Art Director," *Film Comment*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (May-June 1978), pages 25-60, at 32.
2. Bart Mills, "The Brave New Worlds of Production Design," *American Film*, Vol. VII, No. 4 (January-February 1982), pages 40-46.
3. Michael Webb, "The City in Film," *Design Quarterly*, No. 136 (1987), pages 2-33; see also Edward Ball, "The Cinematic City," *Metropolis*, Vol. 6, No. 8 (April 1987), pages 56-59, 65, 67; and *CINES-CITES* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987) & *L'Album de CINES-CITES* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987).
4. Donald Albrecht, *Designing Dreams: Modern Architecture in the Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).
5. Heinrich Wölfflin does not actually use the phrase in his *Principles of Art History*, translated by M. D. Hottinger (New York: Dover, 1950) or other books. Commentators have often used the phrase to characterize Wölfflin's position. An example is Arnold Hauser's essay "The Philosophical Implications of Art History: 'Art History Without Names,'" in his book *The Philosophy of Art History* (New York: Knopf, 1959).
6. Albrecht, op. cit., page xx.
7. Ibid., page 6.
8. Ibid., page 110.
9. Ibid., page vii.
10. The fruits of this practice, which are preserved in collections of various sizes, public and private, have been a mixed blessing for film historians. Production stills are sometimes the only trace that remains of lost films, and therefore comprise an invaluable record. On the other hand, most film analysts have at some time or other found themselves searching a film in vain to find an image that appeared in a book, magazine, newspaper or photo archive.
11. Leon Barsacq, *A History of Set Design*, tr. by Michael Bullock, revised and edited by Elliott Stein (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1976), passim.
12. Ibid., page 84.
13. Eugene Lourie, *My Work in Films* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), pages 61-62.
14. "Interview with Nicholas Ray," *Movie*, #9 (May 1963), page 14.
15. Albrecht, op. cit., pages xvi-xvii.

16. Linwood G. Dunn, "Cinemagic of the Optical Printer," in Dunn and George E. Turner (Ed.), *The ASC Treasury of Visual Effects* (Hollywood: American Society of Cinematographers, 1983), page 240.
17. Robert L. Carringer, *The Making of Citizen Kane* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
18. Ibid., page 94.
19. Ibid., page 99.
20. Jose Luis Guarner, *Roberto Rossellini*, tr. by Elisabeth Cameron (New York: Praeger, 1970), page 6.
21. Barsacq, op. cit., page 74.
22. Ibid., page 84.
23. François Truffaut remarked to Hitchcock, "It seems to me that there were many trick shots in that picture, lots of them almost invisible, and also many special effects, like miniatures and fake sets." Hitchcock does not deny this but cites only one example—the "exact copy" of the United Nations lobby he had made—in his answer. François Truffaut, *Hitchcock* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), page 251.
24. Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus," tr. by Alan Williams, *Film Quarterly*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 2 (Winter 1974-75), page 42.
25. Christian Metz, "Truancy and the Film," translated by Francoise Meltzer, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Spring 1977), pages 657-675.
26. Julia Kristeva, "Four Types of Signifying Practice," *Semiotext(e)*, Vol. I, No. 1 (1974), page 66.
27. Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* and *Elements of Semiology*, tr. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (Boston: Beacon, 1970), page 86.
28. In the Napoleonic section of the film, we see a recreation of *The Execution of Maximilian* (1868-69) by Edouard Manet, as soldiers execute citizens following the battle of Castiglione (1796). The choice of this image and the mode of rendering it cinematically emphasize the flatness or two-dimensionality of the painterly image, but the tour de force does not quite work—we are aware of three dimensions. This is reinforced by cinema's time dimension—we hear the rifles fire and see the bodies fall. Thus a medium which is two-dimensional but pretends to be three (cinema) reproduces an image from another two-dimensional medium pretending three only to emphasize, finally, its own superior illusionism.

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²⁵ **"Trucage" and the Film**

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